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AUTHOR Schug, Mark C.
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ABSTRACT

According to the document, Dr. Andrew Brimmer did an excellent job of identifying emerging economic concerns. Dr. Brimmer's characterization of economics as a tool kit can help young people examine important social questions using principles of economics as the tool for analysis. One way to build an economics tool kit is by placing more stress on the basic premises of economics. These premises can be thought of as a set of generalizations about economic behavior which students can use to analyze current concerns such as the economics of national health insurance or the economics of pricing natural resources. The tool kit should provide students with answers to their questions. Three values derived from the discipline of economics might be worthy of inclusion in a citizenship education program. These values are as follows: (1) individuals are responsible for their own actions; (2) private property builds freedom and personal responsibility; and (3) people should not impose unwanted costs on others. Conference participants were asked to examine the papers presented and identify examples of how the ideas could translate into good teaching or be developed into sound instructional material. More specific examples are needed to help translate these powerful new ideas into meaningful classroom instruction. (GEA)

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ECONOMICS IN THE CIVICS CURRICULUM:
A Reaction to Andrew F. Brimmer

By Dr. Mark C. Schug

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[Economics in the Core Curriculum: A Reaction to Brimmer's Paper]

Response to Paper III

Dr. Mark C. Schug
University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee

Dr. Brimmer has done an excellent job of identifying emerging economic concerns. I especially like his characterization of economics as a tool kit. This metaphor reminds us of the importance of helping young people examine important social questions using principles of economics as the tool for analysis. Dr. Brimmer has also stressed the importance of teaching about macroeconomics and international economics. These are areas in which students tend to have a weak understanding.

Building an Economics Tool Kit

One way that we might be able to build an economics tool kit is by placing more stress on the basic premises of economics. These premises can be thought of as a set of generalizations about economic behavior. One example is that scarcity means that people have to make choices. In economics, we often speak about the importance of choice making. We teach that every choice involves a cost. Students can use this generalization to help them analyze current concerns such as the economics of national health insurance or the economics of pricing natural resources.

A second generalization might be that the consequences of every choice lie in the future. Other choices are history lessons. By applying this generalization, students learn to distinguish between opportunity costs which reflect people's expectations about the future and sunk costs which reflect decisions which are already made and cannot be changed.

A third generalization is that people make purposeful decisions. Why do people sometimes exhibit what we might consider to be puzzling economic

behavior? When we analyze their behavior using our economics tool kit, we begin to understand why people do what they do. For example, students might wonder why there are lines in front of stores in the Soviet Union. Why are people willing to spend days waiting to get fresh produce? Why are agricultural products not more plentiful? Our tool kit should provide young people with the answers to these questions.

Here is another example from Capstone: The Nation's High School Economics Course. In this program, we ask high school students to consider why people in Cuba in the 1980's use restaurants like they were grocery stores. Cubans go to restaurants, order a great deal of food, and take it home and eat it. What's going on? Is there some cultural quirk about living in Cuba? Students with a good economics tool kit begin to predict why this happens. They would assume that Cubans must be making purposeful decisions. They would also know that rules influence people's behavior. In Cuba, people with extra income cannot purchase all that they like in grocery stores because many products are rationed. However, restaurants are not subject to rationing rules.

Economic Values for Citizenship

Fundamental to citizenship education is the identification of values to instill in young people. Are there substantive values that we could learn from economics that might help inform the content of a civics program? Most discussions of economic values involve the distinction between normative economics--judgements about economic policy, and positive economics--scientific predictions or descriptions. I don't think that this distinction is very helpful for our purposes here today. Instead, I would like to suggest three values derived from the discipline

of economics. I think that these and other examples might be worthy of inclusion in a civics program.

First, individuals are responsible for their own actions. In economics, we often speak about the importance of individual choice. When people make their own choices, they are responsible for those choices. Responsibility of choice making is not obvious to everyone. In many situations, the choices we have to make involve high stakes. It may seem like we don't have a choice. But I think an important value that we need to communicate to young people is that they do have responsibility for their own actions.

A second value drawn from economics is that private property builds freedom and personal responsibility. Private property is one of the main ingredients that makes our system work. As Professor Brimmer has observed, economists in countries like China and the Soviet Union are now beginning to experiment with quasi-private ownership of farms and factories. We should illustrate for students how private property builds freedom and builds responsibility.

Finally, people should not impose unwanted costs on others. For example, students often arrive late to class and interrupt instruction. Usually, the teacher describes this an example of discourteous behavior. In economic terms, this is a case of students imposing unwanted costs on others. Or, you go to a movie and the people next to you are chatting away. They are imposing a cost that you never agreed to pay. If they want the benefit of conversation while watching a film, then they should pay for it. For example, the movie theatre should build a booth for

people who wish to talk during the film, and charge an additional fee for this benefit.

Let me make just one final point. I've read the papers presented at this conference. My challenge to the participants at this conference is to examine these papers and identify examples of how these ideas could translate into good teaching or sound instructional material. We need more specific examples to help translate these powerful ideas into meaningful classroom instruction.

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